




Closing in for the kill—the Buffalo Hunt of pioneer days.

“The Order of the Buffalo Hunt”

OR eighty years the buffalo has been the animal emblem of the Province of Manitoba. But for much longer it has been a symbol of wealth, strength and enterprise.

Now scarce, buffalo were once the “monarchs of the plain.” Of all the predatory

animals, only the full-grown grisly bear was a match for the buffalo, which was immensely strong, with a great boulder of a head, broad, powerful shoulders, knife-sharp horns, and a keen sense of smell and hearing. In spite of his bulk, he could run with amazing speed and agility. His robust build, together with his resourcefulness and

adaptability, enabled him to travel the continent, meeting few enemies which he could not repulse. Millions once roamed the western plains, scarring the countryside with trails along which the whole herd lumbered in Indian file, and indenting the land with "wallows," where each in turn would roll the dust and vermin from his hide. One naturalist writes, "of all the quadrupeds who ever lived, no species has ever existed in such great number."

The plains were the richest pasturing grounds of the buffalo. In the early part of the last century they furnished the food supply for the entire fur trade. Metis hunters employed by the fur companies, provisioned their canoes with buffalo meat for the long journeys to the trading posts in the

north. No time was lost in hunting or fishing on the way.

The settlers who came to the Red River valley under the sponsorship of the Earl of Selkirk, learned from the Indians and fur traders to depend on the buffalo for many of their material needs. They quickly acquired a taste for the dried meat, called "pemmican," which kept indefinitely through all types of weather.

The colony at Red River was saved several times from starvation by buffalo meat from the adjacent plains. Buffalo hide and bone provided bed and blankets, clothing, roof, rug and saddle, sinews for bows, lanceheads, kettles and boats. The long buffalo coat kept them warm at night and held out the cold when they drove about in their

sleighs. One writer recalling his years at Red River compared the buffalo to the wheat of today as the staff of life in western Canada.

According to the writers of the day, Buffalo Hunting in Manitoba was done on a larger scale and was more highly organized, and picturesque than anywhere else. The animals were hunted by a method evolved by the Indian, and perfected by the metis who were the acknowledged masters of the organized chase. The fame of Red River Buffalo Hunts spread far, and sometimes a visit to Red River was made only as an excuse to join the hunt. An early sheriff of the colony, Alexander Ross, writes: "It is not uncommon nowadays to see, Knights, Baronets, Officers of the Guards and some of the higher nobility of England and other countries, coursing their steeds over the boundless plains and enjoy-

ing the pleasure of the chase among half-breeds and savages."

In a report on a hunt run in 1840, Ross describes the brigade setting out—

"In the leafy month of June carts were seen emerging from every nook and cranny of the settlement, bound for the plains. From Fort Garry the cavalcade and campfollowers crowded onto the public road until, reaching a level plain, the whole patriarchal camp squatted down like pilgrims on a journey to the Holy Land.

"Here the roll was called, the general muster taken and the rules and regulations for the journey finally settled. Officials of the hunt were named and installed in their offices, and all without the aid of writing materials.

“The camp occupied as much ground as a modern city and was formed in a circle: the carts were arranged side by side right around the campsite with the tents set just within in double and triple rows on one side, the animals at the other side. Thus, the carts formed a strong barrier, not only for securing the people and animals within, but as a place of shelter and defence against an attack from an enemy without.”

Like the bull fight in Spain or the fox hunt in England, the method of hunting buffalo developed into a ritual, neither as colorful nor elaborate, but just as spectacular. And though it developed into a sport, its prime purpose was to kill buffalo for food, and a hunter who left his carrion's carcass to the wolves was soon blacklisted. Also, there

were no real spectators. Wives and children accompanied the hunt, but they worked. They skinned the trophies and made the winter's supply of pemmican there and then.

The first night out, the men of the Brigade—as it was called—met in a Great Council to elect a Chief Hunter and hunt leaders. The Chief Hunter from then to the end of the hunt acted as mayor, magistrate, priest, camp manager, general overseer and arbiter.

Under him were ten Captains of the Hunt who each led a group of ten men who acted as a kind of military police—or Provosts. Ten Buffalo Scouts were also appointed and assigned the skilled task of tracking down the buffalo for the main body of hunters. The Scout on duty was in charge of the Camp Flag which was hoisted on a Red

River cart at the head of the cavalcade as the signal to break camp. The lowered pennant was the signal for encamping. While the flag was up however, the Scout of the day was chief of the expedition. Captains were subject to him and the Provosts were his messengers. He commanded all. The moment the flag was lowered his functions ceased and the duties of the Captains and Provosts began.

Strict rules were laid down on these large expeditions. This one in 1840 consisted of 1,600 hunters, women and children and so a certain amount of policing was necessary. Some of these hunts lasted two weeks to a month and system and order were essential. No buffalo were run on Sunday. No party could leave the main group without permis-

sion. No party could run buffalo before the general orders were given. Every Captain was expected to patrol the camp in turn with his Provosts and to keep guard. Anyone convicted of stealing was brought to the middle of the camp where his name was called out three times together with the epithet, "thief!" The penalties for disobeying a law were applied sternly. For the first offence the culprit had his saddle and bridle cut up. For his second offence, his coat was cut to slivers, and for the third, he was flogged, publicly.

At night, the hunters slept under the open sky . . . horses picketed to saddles, saddles as pillows and muskets in hand.

The morning of the hunt began early. The blades of grass were still strung with

dew when the Buffalo Scouts set out on horseback in search of the main herd. Meanwhile, the women set up their home-made wooden racks on which to dry the strips of meat for pemmican-making. The men cleaned their guns, filled their powder flasks and bullet pouches, checked saddles and bridles on horses which, snorting and rearing, spoiled to be off. The buffalo horses were called "buffalo runners" and were specially trained for the hunt. The Indians used to slit one ear of their buffalo runners to distinguish them from the other horses—just as a brand will identify a fighting bull.

Before the scouts found the main herd they usually came upon several small groups grazing. But on a general hunt there was a rule that small groups were never attacked. This was to avoid scaring off the main herd.

The scouts returned to camp with their directions. The hunters mounted, and, following the Chief Scout, moved out of the camp. As they approached the buffalo they were careful to keep to windward and out of scent, and well behind a ridge, out of sight.

Along the line of moving horsemen went the whispered signal—"halt." Two seasoned hunters dismounted and crawled up the ridge to reconnoitre, observed the lay of the land, the direction of the wind and decided from which side the charge should be made.

Then, a dozen hunters on the fleetest horses rode around to the opposite side to scare the herd toward the others. Sneaking up behind the buffalo, they surprised them with a great shout which was the signal to charge. "Equa! Equa!" was the Indian cry—"Now! Now!"

Instantly the herd huddled together in formation, cows and calves on the inside, bulls forming protective flanks. The bulls led off at a gallop and the herd thundered after. From over the ridge the waiting hunters came flying, and as buffalo and horses mingled, clouds of dust rose over the plain that trembled with the shock of galloping animals. The bulls ran in a solid block on either side of the cows and for the hunter to break through this moving wall to get at the more valuable cows was always a delicate and dangerous business. The infuriated bulls speared the air with their horns and hunter and horse ran the risk of being gored.

But there was little time for caution. The hunter, singling out a fat cow, had to trust his horse to respond instantly to his spur,

clear the badger holes, sidestep the sharp horns of the angry, snorting bulls, and make for the quarry. It was a running fight all the way and the hunter had to fire and reload his gun all with one arm for the other held the reins. His musket had only the first shot wadded down. This he fired as he drew alongside his cow, down through the shoulder towards the heart. As the animal stumbled to the ground, the hunter sometimes threw a cap, sash or knife sheath on the carcass for easy identification later. Spurring his horse on to the next fat cow, he primed his gun, poured in a charge of powder and then spit the shot into the barrel from his mouth where, for convenience, he kept his reserves.

Speed and precision were the qualities required of a good buffalo runner and its

mount for the hunt was over within a few minutes. The hunter had to spot a cow he wanted and whip his horse towards it. The horse had to be swift and unafraid. One shot was all a hunter could spare one beast for he was caught in the midst of a moving, stampeding herd and to hesitate to reload meant being trampled underfoot.

The hunters ran the herd for about one mile. Some of the long-winded horses might run two miles but most of the killing was done within 500 yards. Each hunter usually managed to kill three or four; the best hunters slew a dozen or more while some got only one or two.

As the escaping buffalo vanished behind a ridge the hunters turned their horses and headed back over the blood-puddled, carcass-

strewn plain to look for the animals they'd shot. At once the work of skinning the animals began, for unless the meat was safely in camp by nightfall, it had to be left to the wolves. A sudden thundershower could ruin the morning's shoot.

Before noon, the women streamed out in ox-drawn carts to haul the meat away and begin their share of the day's work. The stomach and hump were considered the greatest delicacies and were eaten right away. The rest of the meat was cut into strips, hung over the wooden racks to dry in the sun or over a hot fire until it was crisp. It was then laid out on a rock and pounded into powder. Melted buffalo fat was poured on the powdered meat and mixed in with a shovel. This mixture, which sometimes in-

cluded dried fruits and berries, was done up in bags of hide. Thus the women put down the winter's supply of pemmican which, with bannock bread and the vegetables their small farms yielded, got the settlers through the long, cold, barren season.

"The great days in old Red River were the days when the hunters went out and the days when they came back laden with the spoils of the hunt," says one writer. A big hunt like this one was staged twice a year, in spring—or, as the Indians called it, the season of the thin buffalo moon—and in late summer or early fall—the season of the fat buffalo moon.

Every year thousands of buffalo were killed. For half a century expeditions set out to hunt, returning to Red River with

carts creaking under the load of meat and hides.

Manitoba's natural link with the buffalo goes back to those days and further—to when the first Indian encamped on Manitoba soil. So strongly did the people of Manitoba feel about this link that, instead of a symbol representing their racial origins, they chose for their emblem, the buffalo—the source of life itself in earlier days.

Manitoba's right to the buffalo emblem officially dates from a Dominion Order-in-Council in 1870 which was re-affirmed in a Royal Warrant granted by King Edward VII in 1905. Two massive bronze buffalo now guard the Grand Staircase which leads to the provincial chamber of government. A buffalo is imprinted on every official document

while even the day-to-day business of government departments is recorded on stationery bearing this insignia.

And in spite of the toll taken in buffalo in the great hunts of a century ago, some herds

still survive. From a herd kept in Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park, Winnipeg police are still provided with winter overcoats of the distinctive, curly hide of the buffalo.

To share with our visitors the spirit of enterprise and enthusiasm which marked the Buffalo Hunts of the past, and to preserve and propagate today those qualities of fellowship and hospitality which our pioneer forefathers offered all who visited their rough country one hundred years ago, the "Order of the Buffalo Hunt" has been instituted.

Our Order has no membership fees or initiation ceremony, no ritual or code of rules. The title of Officer of the Buffalo Hunt is bestowed on persons who have made a distinctive contribution to the life of Manitoba, or to people of high office outside the province who have shown themselves to be kindly disposed towards Manitoba.

Any visitor who remains in Manitoba for seven days or more is eligible to become a Member of the Buffalo Hunt. Registration cards and certificates are issued by the Bureau of Travel and Publicity, Department of Industry and Commerce, 254 Legislative Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The first of these is the fact that the
the second is the fact that the
the third is the fact that the

The fourth is the fact that the
the fifth is the fact that the
the sixth is the fact that the

The seventh is the fact that the
the eighth is the fact that the
the ninth is the fact that the

The tenth is the fact that the
the eleventh is the fact that the
the twelfth is the fact that the